

# **David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams Letters PC.1753**

**Finding aid prepared by Fran Tracy-Walls**

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This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit

October 10, 2014

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

This finding aid revises an earlier one, 2002, by George Stevenson, that described three letters. The current finding aid includes descriptions of twenty-three additional letters received 22 February 2010.

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## Summary Information

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**Repository** State Archives of North Carolina

**Title** David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams Letters

**Date [inclusive]** 1927-1934

**Extent** 1.0 boxes

**Language** English

David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams (1900-1975), firearms inventor, was born and grew up on the farm of his family near Godwin in Cumberland County. During a raid on an illicit still in 1921, Williams was involved in a shoot-out. Though he denied shooting the deputy sheriff, he averted possible capital punishment by pleading guilty to second-degree murder. While serving a projected twenty to thirty- year sentence, Williams won the admiration of the warden who saw his skill in repairing and designing guns, and assigned him to the prison machine shop. He is recognized as designer of short stroke piston, which made possible the M-1 carbine rifle.

**Abstract** Includes twenty-six manuscript letters and one invitation sent 1923-1934 to David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams, primarily during the time of his incarceration at the State Farm at Caledonia, Halifax County. The majority were written by a brother, Robert Wesley Williams, then a student at Elon College. Three of the letters were accessioned in 2002; and an additional twenty-four items in 2010. The letters reflect the strong support of his family.

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### Preferred Citation

[Identification of item] in PC.1753, David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams Letters, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C., U.S.A.

## Biographical/Historical note

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David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams (1900-1975), firearms inventor, was born and grew up on the Williams's family farm near Godwin in Cumberland County. David was the eldest of seven children born to the union of James Claud and Laura Susan (Kornegay) Williams (1874-1947). James Claud (1860-1843) had four older children from his first marriage to Eula Lee (Breece) Williams (1868-1898).

One of Williams's brothers was Robert Wesley Williams (1905-1972), one of the letter writers represented in these papers. Known as Wesley, he entered Elon College (now University) in 1925 and was a member of the class of 1929. He married a fellow student, Melba Grogan, of the class of 1932.

Having been involved in the defense of some illicit liquor stills in which a deputy sheriff was shot to death during the course of a raid, "Carbine" Williams was sentenced to prison, for second-degree murder. While incarcerated at Caledonia State Farm he worked in the prison machine shop where his mechanical inventiveness was observed and fostered by the superintendent. While in prison Williams came to the attention of the Colt Patent Firearms Company. When released from incarceration, Williams continued to develop and perfect his firearms-related inventions.

Williams's floating chamber was used in various small arms (Colt's semi--automatic pistol, the Remington rifle, and the machine gun employed by the U.S. Army). The first model of the carbine using his short--stroke piston, the M1, was the rifle of standard issue and use by the United States Army through the whole of World War II and until the time of the Vietnamese Conflict when it was replaced by a later model, the M16.

### Chronology

1900, November-David Marshall Williams (DMW) born to James Claudius and Laura Susan (Kornegay) Williams (1874-1947), in Cumberland County, near Godwin. He was the third oldest child of nine children born to the couple. His brother, Robert Wesley, was born in 1905.

1918- DMW married Margaret (Maggy) Isobel Cook of Cumberland County.

1921-Unbeknownst to his wife, DMW became involved with illegal distilleries. Law enforcement officers raided one operation and, in the ensuing gunfight, the deputy sheriff was shot to death. In court DMW denied firing the fatal shot, but after the jury hung, he pled guilty to second degree murder in order to avoid a second trial and possible death sentence. Subsequently, he was sentenced to twenty to thirty years.

1920s, early years-After serving at Central Prison, Raleigh, and a camp near Robbinsville, DMW was transferred to Caledonia State Prison, Halifax County. The superintendent, H. T. Peoples observed Williams's genius fashioning objects by hand, and enabled him to become a trusty in the prison blacksmith shop.

1925-1929-Williams's brother Robert Wesley Williams was a student at Elon College, a member of the class of 1929.

1920s, later years-At Caledonia, DMW developed the working model of the first floating chamber and short-stroke piston concept, eventually used in the design of semi-automatic pistols, rifles, machine guns, and the M1 carbine.

1928, April 28-Charlotte News announced DMV's invention as one that "could revolutionize the firearms world." The report attracted the attention of Colt Firearms, whose representatives later visited him in prison.

1928—Williams's family and friends in Cumberland County campaigned to have his sentence reduced, resulting in a commutation by then-Governor Angus McLean.

1929, Sept. 29- Williams freed from prison.

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## Collection Overview:

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Includes twenty-six manuscript letters and one invitation sent 1923-1934 to David Marshall ("Carbine") Williams, primarily during the time of his incarceration at the State Farm at Caledonia, Halifax County. The majority were written by a brother, Robert Wesley Williams, then a student at Elon College (University). Three of the letters were accessioned in 2002; and an additional twenty-two in 2011. The letters reflect the strong support of his family, his brother, Wesley, and his mother, who apparently worked tirelessly for the development of his skill in designing and making firearms and for his early prison release.

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## Collection Arrangement

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The letters are arranged chronologically and placed in separate folders, with the exception of two letters mailed in one envelope. Envelopes that came with the letters have been retained with the corresponding letters.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

State Archives of North Carolina June 2014

## **Revision Description**

June 2014

## **Legal Status note**

Gift

## **Access Restrictions**

Available for research.

## **Copyright Notice**

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## **Acquisitions Information**

Gift of Richard Wesley Hite, Columbus, Ohio, 2002; addition, gift of Richard Wesley Hite, Providence, R.I.; Robert Kevin Williams, Godwin, N.C., Jacqueline Hite Bell, Fayetteville, N.C., and, March, 2010

## **Processing Information note**

Processed by George Stevenson (first accession of three letters), and Fran Tracy-Walls, additional twenty-four items accessioned in 2011;

Finding Aid by Fran Tracy-Walls

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## **Controlled Access Headings**

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### **Corporate Name(s)**

- Elon College.
- State Farm at Caledonia.

### **Geographic Name(s)**

- Cumberland County (N.C.)

## **Personal Name(s)**

- Simpson, Paul
- Williams family
- Williams, David Marshall (1900-1975)
- Williams, Laura Susan Kornegay
- Williams, Robert Wesley

## **Subject(s)**

- Christmas
- College life
- College sports
- Family relationships--North Carolina
- Firearms
- Inventors
- Pardon--North Carolina
- Prisoners--North Carolina
- Runners (Sports)

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## **General note**

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Each letter in the 2002 accession is accompanied by typed notes furnished by the donor. Photocopies of the envelopes for the 1929 and 1934 letters are in the collection (the original envelopes having been returned to the donor).

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## **Sources:**

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Biographical sketch of Williams, David Marshall (Carbine), by H.G. Jones, in Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, s.v., edited by William S. Powell, published by the University of North Carolina Press, and published online at <http://ncpedia.org>. Cemetery records of Old Bluff Presbyterian Church, Godwin, Cumberland County. North Carolina Death Certificates, 1909-1975; United States Census Records, 1900, 1910, 1920.



## Collection Inventory

	Box-folder
Mother to David (DMW), November 2, 1923	PC.1753/ folder 1
From Mrs. J.C. Williams (Laura) mother, from Godwin, to DMW, in care of Capt. H. I. Peoples, Halifax. She speaks affectionately of DMW's wife, Maggie. She refers to their various trips to nearby towns to purchase his requests, from a toothbrush, to fine emery cloth, and encourages him to let her know of any materials they are allowed to send. She refers to the issues of acquiring silver during that time, and the problems incurred by those smuggling silver to Germany. She proposes his making moulds and having someone locally (Ezell) using DMW's equipment to melt silver then pour in those mould sent home by DMW. A second letter from DMW's brother, David Wesley is enclosed. He hopes warmly for DMW's return. Refers to a shared acquaintance, Lony [sic] Smith who was at Camp Bragg but ran away to Germany to avoid punishment. The postscript on the second, last page, includes a message: "Perhaps you'd better ask Capt. Peoples to allow you that privilege [and] there will be no trouble in doing things. Mother."	
Wesley to Jack (DMW), February 8, 1925	PC.1753/ folder 2
Written from Godwin. No envelope. Refers to school work and plans to graduate [high school]; basketball; camping; bullfrog hunting, which reminds him of DMW, stirs his expectation that in the future they will hunt together again. Ends with lament that "things hardly ever happen here except a few Negro fights and so on."	
Wesley to Father, October 28, 1925	PC.1753/ folder 3
Written from Elon College. Envelope enclosed. Spoke of relief of recent visit home and the thought that "there is not a better place to live than on the farm," and that life there is among	

"the grandest and freest life that a person can live." Expresses desire to follow in his father's footsteps.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), November 30, 1925

PC.1753/  
folder 4

From Elon College. Envelope enclosed. Speaks briefly of visit home at Thanksgiving; hunting; trip to "the University" to see some fine plays the Playmakers were giving, with the wish that DMW could have seen them. Refers to Leon going to New York, but wanting to come home for Christmas, and the college track team to which he (Wesley) belongs, and meets with State and colleges in Durham area.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), December 10, 1925

PC.1753/  
folder 5

From Elon College. Date from Postmark. Envelope enclosed. Brief letter expressing his thinking of DMW; plans for Christmas at home and anticipated hunting; preparing for hard exams; and college dormitory prank.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), December 17, 1925

PC.1753/  
folder 6

From Elon College. Envelope enclosed. Christmas greeting card. Elon College insignia.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), December 17, 1925 [postmark]

PC.1753/  
folder 7

From Elon College. Brief message regarding holiday plans, consisting of hunting, for which he states he has "packed my hunting rig and will send it home tomorrow."

Wesley to Jack (DMW), January 18, 1926 [postmark]

PC.1753/  
folder 8

From Elon College on paper with Kappa Lambda Iota Omicron insignia. Envelope enclosed. Brief letter about returning to college life, studying, after the holidays at home; references to

track training and possible trips to South Carolina and Virginia; a possible summer trip; and preparing a debate for society [Clio Literary Society?]

Invitation, February 1926 [lacks postmark]

PC.1753/  
folder 9

Invitation to Clio Literary Society annual program, 22 February 1926: A drama, "The Dust of the Earth," by Katherine Kavanaugh. Characters included Wesley Williams.

Mother to "My dear child [DMW]," August 4, 1926

PC.1753/  
folder 10

From Mrs. J.C. Williams (Laura) to "My dear child." Expressed thanks for his "sweet letter" and disappointment that Mr. Pou "was not more considerate of your plans." Encouraged him "not to lose heart" for they will proceed with their plans, not yet fully formulated, but will call on Mr. McMillan[?] "for one for he told us he would [,] as he and the Governor was raised near each other." Urges patience, remembrance of God's protective care, and other advice. Asks him where to obtain the 7/32 inch drill. Promises delivery of a crate of cantelopes and indicates that they give lots of them to [Mr.Elery E.] Ezzell's shop [a blacksmith and mechanic per 1930 U.S. Federal census].

Wesley to Jack (DMW), Novmeber 1, 1926

PC.1753/  
folder 11

Written at Elon College and postmarked Durham. Envelope enclosed. Writes of being home quite a while because of sickness, and with plans to return to college after Christmas. Indicates that the farm produced a big cotton crop, though the prices are low. References to horseback riding, hunting, and "Shelton's new 410 gague [sic] shot gun." [Shelton Morris Williams, b. 1908, was one of the siblings of DMW and Wesley.]

Wesley to Jack (DMW), December 26, 1926

PC.1753/  
folder 12

Postmark not clear, but apparently mailed from Godwin. Envelope enclosed. Reference to the marriage of "the man who ran the race" last spring. Writes of the coming Christmas

holidays, including enthusiasm that Maggie, DMW's wife, had come in from Smithfield, and the thought that "she will hang her stocking with the rest of us."

Wesley to Jack (DMW) October 16, 1927

PC.1753/  
folder 13

Written at Elon College. No envelope enclosed. Reports his improved health, efforts to exercise daily, and plans to go out for track team, with a good chance of becoming captain. Writes of plans to major in geology and hopes of earning a doctorate in Chicago and possibly work in South America for the government or teach in college. Refers to the presence on campus of "quite a few good looking janes here if a man is interested enough to see them."

Mother to Beloved, Darling Child (DMW), November 25, 1927

PC.1753/  
folder 14

Postmark. Godwin, NC. Two letters enclosed. Envelope enclosed. Jubilant report of hearing news from Kirk, the attorney, that DMW would receive a pardon. Kirk had the family had met with the Pardon Commissioner the previous Tuesday, but had stayed on to present DMW's case. Kirk had ridden by bus to bring the news first to Maggie, at the home of Maggie's parents, the John T. Cooks, and then to her. Report included word that governor said that between now and June that DMW would be free.

Wesley, at home, to Jack (DMW) "I just came in to help the family and friends thank the Great One who has made this possible. This is the Thanksgiving that I have been looking forward to for years."

Wesley to Jack (DMW), December 25, 1927

PC.1753/  
folder 15

[No. 1 of 3 letters in 2002 accession.] (#1) Written on the evening of Christmas Day, 1927, Written at home to brother at the State Farm at Caledonia. Wesley speaks of Christmas at home, to which he has returned for the holiday from Elon College, and tells him of a young man he is expecting to come by to see him at Godwin. The young man, Paul "Hardrock" Simpson, was about to enter the highly publicized 1928 cross-country race from Los Angeles to New York in which Wesley Williams was to act as his trainer.

Mother to My precious child (DMW), December 27, 1927

PC.1753/  
folder 16

[no envelope. Written from Godwin, NC] She reassured DMW that he was not paroled but will be freed, trying to dispel some misunderstandings that had arisen and possible fears that they had been misled regarding DMW's release. "Maggie sent you the telegram that Bridgers sent Kirk that you were commuted." She also referred to a piece from the Durham paper that was clearer than other news articles.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), November 16, 1927

PC.1753/  
folder 17

[postmark. Mailed from Godwin, NC] Wesley referred to racial tensions around the area that he described as "growls." Wrote of the First National Bank of Dunn "breaking," with some losing all they had.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), August 28, 1929

PC.1753/  
folder 18

[postmark. Mailed from Godwin, NC.] Addressed to Mr. David M. Williams/State Farm, Halifax, N.C.] After brief family news and advice "Do not pay any attention to what people tell you about family affairs," Wesley wrote the following: "I am very glad that your rifle proved a success. We are very interested in all your work and in all that you do." Mentioned that he had made the trip across the continent (another cross-country race?), but "it sure was a job that I am not going to try again for anybody." Enclosure in envelope: Memo to Marshall Williams on Letterhead of State Prison Dept., Office of Caledonia Prison Farm. Dated August 26, 1929. "I want inventory of all international parts on hand [.] Assist the Office man in securing this list. Signed by N.E. Ranes, Acting Farm Mgr.

Wesley to Mother, Fall of 1927 [Undated, a Thursday]

PC.1753/  
folder 19

[Written at Elon College.] No envelope enclosed. Expressed thanks for check, laundry, and letter; and expressed surprise at death of Mary Ezzell [According to the North Carolina

Death Certificate, she died Sept. 11, 1927 at the age of 38, and was the wife of E. E. Ezzell.] Wesley mentioned his quitting smoking since track season had commenced.

Wesley to Jack (DMW), Ca. 1928-1929, Undated Sunday night

PC.1753/  
folder 20

[Written at Elon College.] No envelope enclosed. Referred to Marshall Guy and quite a few other friends around. Those few enemies, Wesley, wrote "were narrow minded and jealous of our position."

Wesley to Jack (DMW), Ca. 1928-1929, Undated, Tuesday night

PC.1753/  
folder 21

[Written at home, Godwin, N.C.] No envelope enclosed. Expressed regret about the indifference of Mr. Pou [George Ross Pou, Superintendent of the State's Prison Department]. Indicated family's plans to help DMW, and noted that the "Gov. is away at this time but we are going to do something soon."

From Wesley to Jack (DMW), Between 1925-1929) Undated. Thursday morning

PC.1753/  
folder 22

[Written at Elon College.] No envelope enclosed. Wrote of difficult geology course; quitting his pipe; aspiration to do well on the track team, with Hardrock as coach, who at that time ran 15 miles a day.

Wesley to Mother and Dad, Between 1925-1929. Undated. Thursday night

PC.1753/  
folder 23

[Written at Elon College.] No envelope enclosed. Mentioned sending his laundry home; described a social event for the college boys, a weinnie [sic] roast at a lake at the behest of Dr. [William Allen] Harper, president of the college; asked for money and letters.

Mother to Wesley, October 1, 1929

PC.1753/  
folder 24

[No. 2 of 3 letters in 2002 accession.] Sent from Godwin, letting her son, Wesley and his wife know that her husband, James Claudius Williams (1860-1943), and two of his sons had gone to pick up Marshall upon his release from prison.

David Marshall (DMW) to Wesley, December 16, 1934

PC.1753/  
folder 25

[No. 3 of 3 letters in 2002 accession.] Written by DMW from Springfield, Massachusetts, on December 16, 1934, to his brother Wesley saying that he would go on to Colt's at Hartford and from there to Remington's at Bridgeport before going on to Washington, D.C.. The reverse of the letter contains a note from DMW's wife, Margaret Isabel (Cook) Williams to Wesley, his wife Melba (Grogan) Williams, and their family.